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“Safe from destruction by fire”: Isabella Stewart Gardner’s Venetian Manuscripts

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Abstract

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston houses over thirty Venetian manuscripts dating from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. They comprise official documents issued by the Doges; histories of the Republic of Venice, its government, and the patriciate; diplomas; and a statute book of a lay confraternity. Most volumes contain complete and dated texts, are illuminated, and survive in their original bindings. The collection, therefore, charts the evolution over three centuries of Venetian book production, and provides a wealth of sources for the study of Venetian history, portraiture, iconography, genealogy, and heraldry.

Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924) purchased many of her Venetian manuscripts en bloc in 1903 from the Harvard University professor Charles Eliot Norton (1827–1907). Norton placed his collection formed in Venice in Gardner’s newly-opened museum to safeguard it from dispersal and mutilation for its miniatures and bindings. Drawing on Gardner and Norton’s unpublished correspondence and acquisition documents in the archives of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Harvard University, this article reconstructs the formation of one of the most important collections of Venetian manuscripts outside of Venice and presents a hitherto unknown episode of the preservation of illuminated manuscripts by two prominent Gilded Age American collectors.

Keywords

Venice; Boston; collecting; illuminated manuscripts; ducali; commisioni dogali; mariegola; Isabella Stewart Gardner; Charles Eliot Norton; John Ruskin; Rawdon Lubbock Brown; Edward Cheney; Bernard Quaritch; Benedetto Bordon; T.o Ve. Master; San Geminiano

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“Safe from Destruction by Fire” *Isabella Stewart Gardner's Venetian Manuscripts*

ANNE-MARIE EZE
Houghton Library, Harvard University

OVER A DECADE AGO the exhibition *Gondola Days: Isabella Stewart Gardner and the Palazzo Barbaro Circle* explored the rich Pan-European and American expatriate culture that flourished in Venice at the end of the nineteenth century and inspired Isabella Stewart Gardner (1840–1924) to create a museum in Boston as a temple to Venetian art and architecture (fig. 1). On this occasion, attention was drawn for the first time to the museum's holdings of Venetian manuscripts, and it was observed that in her day Gardner had been the only prominent American collector of manuscripts to focus on Venice.¹ The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's collection of Venetian manuscripts comprises more than thirty items, spanning the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. The collections can be divided into four broad categories: official documents issued by the Doges; histories of the Most Serene Republic of Venice—called the “Serenissima”—its government, and its patriciate; diplomas; and a statute book of

1 Helena Szépe, “Isabella Stewart Gardner's Venetian Manuscripts,” in *Gondola Days: Isabella Stewart Gardner and the Palazzo Barbaro Circle*, ed. Elizabeth Anne McCauley, Alan Chong, Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, and Richard Lingner (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2004), 233–35.



FIGURE 1. Veronese Room, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston.

a lay confraternity.² Most of the manuscripts contain complete and dated texts, are illuminated, and survive in their original bindings. The Gardner's collection not only charts the evolution over three centuries of Venetian book production, but also provides a wealth of sources for the study of the history, portraiture, iconography, genealogy, and heraldry of the Republic of Venice. It is the integrity of these codices that distinguishes Gardner's collection of Venetian manuscripts from those of many of her contempo-

2 See Morris Carter, *A Choice of Manuscripts and Bookbindings from the Library of Isabella Stewart Gardner, Fenway Court* (Boston: Merrymount, 1922), 33–52; Seymour de Ricci and William J. Wilson, *Census of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the United States and Canada*, 3 vols. (New York: Wilson, 1935–1940), 1:932–36, nos. 14–33, 37–38. For a concordance of de Ricci's *Census* and Gardner Museum manuscript numbers, see Anne-Marie Eze, "Italian Illuminated Manuscripts at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston," *Rivista di Storia della Miniatura* 16 (2012): 81–94 at 91. Also in the collection, but not recorded by Carter or de Ricci, are four dispatches from governors of Venetian territories to doges Francesco Molin, Giovanni I Cornaro, and Domenico II Contarini dated from 1628 to 1662 (Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum [henceforth ISGM], 2.a.2.2.1–4).

raries whose tastes conformed to the nineteenth-century trend for collecting single leaves and cuttings.³ Credit for the museum's remarkable trove is owed to Charles Eliot Norton (1827–1908), the first professor of art history at Harvard University, from whom Gardner purchased most of her Venetian manuscripts *en bloc* in 1903. In his late seventies and anxious about the future of his collection and the financial security of his family, Norton strategically placed the Venetian cultural treasures in Gardner's newly-opened museum. His actions ensured that they would be forever protected from the dispersal and mutilation that befell numerous manuscripts during what is often considered the golden age of American rare book collecting.

Drawing on Gardner and Norton's unpublished correspondence and acquisition documents in the archive of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum and Harvard's Houghton Library, this article will reconstruct the formation of this important collection of Venetian manuscripts located in Boston. By elucidating the provenance of and discourse around those volumes collected by Norton in Venice over a couple of decades and sold to Gardner, it presents a hitherto unknown episode of the conscious preservation of illuminated manuscripts by two prominent American collectors at the turn of the twentieth century. In so doing, the article touches on wider themes of societal collapse, nostalgia, obsolescence of material culture, and the appropriation of artistic patrimony through time and space.

Venetian Manuscripts

Most of the manuscripts in the Gardner Museum's rare book collection are *commissioni dogali* or *ducali*, a quintessentially Venetian type of book.⁴ These were deluxe presentation copies of contracts granted to patricians elected

3 Szépe, "Isabella Stewart Gardner's Venetian Manuscripts," 233–35.

4 Highlights from this collection were displayed in the museum's Long Gallery for the exhibition *Illuminating the Serenissima: Books of the Republic of Venice*, 3 May–19 June 2011. See the Gardner's website for the exhibition's online version at http://www.gardnermuseum.org/collection/exhibitions/past_exhibitions/illuminating_the_serenissima?filter=exhibitions:3679. The leading expert on *comissioni dogali* is Helena Szépe. See her articles, "Civic and Artistic Identity in Illuminated Venetian Documents," *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts* 95 (2002): 58–73; and "Painters and Patrons in Venetian Documents," in "Le commissioni ducali nelle collezioni dei Musei Civici Veneziani," *Bollettino dei Musei Civici Veneziani*,



FIGURE 2. Girolamo Morosini, praying to visions of the Virgin and Child and the Trinity, from a *commissione* issued by Doge Francesco Donato to Girolamo Morosini as Captain of Brescia (1547), illuminated by Master T.o. Ve. (active 1520s–1560s). Upper cover (right) tooled in gold with Morosini's name in Latin. Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2.c.2.2.

to administer the city of Venice and to oversee her provinces. From the mid-1400s until the fall of the thousand-year Republic in 1797, recipients of these documents personalized them by commissioning scribes to copy the text, artists to embellish them with religious and allegorical imagery of their political appointment, and binders to encase them in decorative bindings of leather tooled in gold, and in the last decades of the Republic, in full, precious metal covers (fig. 2). An attached lead or silver *bolla*, or ducal seal, authenticated the books as official state documents and conveyed authority to their holder (fig. 3). The decoration of *commissioni* celebrated the Serenissima and its governors' service to the state, piety, and aesthetic taste. It also immortalized the office-holder after his death, since

3rd ser., 8 (2013): 25–40; and her monograph *Privilege and Duty in the Serene Republic: Painted Documents of Renaissance Venice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming).



FIGURE 3. Giovanni Bollani presented to the Virgin and Child by St. John the Evangelist (top), from a *commissione* issued by Doge Giovanni II Cornaro to Giovanni Bollani as Podesta of Chioggia (1718). Upper cover (bottom) with Justice enthroned, the lion of St. Mark, and Bollani family arms, with attached silver seal showing St. Mark blessing the doge. Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2.a.3.1.

upon completing a post his *commissione* was stored in the family archive, transmitting his likeness and achievements to his descendants for centuries to come.⁵

After the fall of the Republic, the offices of the Serenissima became obsolete and many Venetian patricians lost their wealth or their families became extinct. Consequently these manuscripts were sold off in great numbers during the nineteenth century. Many were dismembered for their beautiful full-page illuminations and sumptuous bindings, which were more lucrative when sold as separate leaves rather than as an intact volume. In the 1800s, an interest in the history and archives of the Serenissima on the part of Venetians, and increasingly also foreigners, further stimulated the trade for *commissioni*.

Gardner's First Venetian Manuscript and Charles Eliot Norton

A rare insight into the nineteenth-century market for *commissioni* is provided by Charles Eliot Norton's correspondence, which is rich in details of manuscripts for sale, their asking prices, and the names of sellers. Gardner acquired her first Venetian manuscript in London in 1886 through the assistance of Norton, who was not only Harvard's first professor of art history but also a founder of the fields of Italian and Dante studies in the United States. Norton played an immense role in the shaping of American culture both at the university and nationally.⁶ Gardner had known of the academic since 1878 when she attended his public lecture series on Dante. From 1885, she sat in on private readings of the Florentine poet's work in the study of Shady Hill, Norton's home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and joined the Dante Society, of which Norton was a founding member and

5 Szépe, "Painters and Patrons in Venetian Documents," 25.

6 Kathleen Verduin, "Bread of Angels: Dante Studies and the Moral Vision of Charles Eliot Norton," *Dante Studies* 129 (2001): 63–98 at 63–64.

later president.⁷ In the spring of the same year, Gardner audited Norton's undergraduate course on the history of the fine arts, which was popular both with Harvard students and the general public. It is no exaggeration to say that there would be no Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in its present Italianate form if it were not for Norton. He not only transformed Gardner into an Italophile through his teachings on the peninsula's culture but also encouraged her earliest purchases of Italian books and art on the European art market. Furthermore, Norton introduced her to one of his most promising students, Bernard Berenson (1865–1959), who by 1894 became Gardner's chief art adviser. Thereafter Norton continued to play a significant role in the formation of the museum; however, his contributions have been eclipsed by that of his famous protégé.⁸

In the summer of 1886, Norton alerted Gardner to the forthcoming sale of the library of Edward Cheney (1803–1884), a British art collector and watercolor painter, whom the professor described in a letter to her as "an old acquaintance" and "a great lover of Italy and of fine books."⁹ Norton recommended that Gardner purchase three Italian incunables and appoint Bernard Quaritch (1819–1899), London's leading rare books seller, to bid on her behalf since the auction of Cheney's library was to take place in the British capital at Sotheby's.¹⁰ Gardner's receipt from Quaritch for books bought at the Cheney sale shows that, in addition to the volumes recommended by Norton, she instructed the dealer to bid for many others, including three *commissioni*, called by their alternative name "ducale" on the receipt (fig. 4).¹¹

7 Morris Carter, *Isabella Stewart Gardner and Fenway Court* (3rd rev. ed.; Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1972 [1925]), 54, 93–94; and Maureen Cunningham, "The Dante Quest," *Fenway Court* (1972): 18–25 at 18–21.

8 Carter, *Isabella Stewart Gardner and Fenway Court*, 100, 112, 170, 194, 208.

9 Letter from Charles Eliot Norton to Isabella Stewart Gardner, 13 June 1866, ISGM, Archive.

10 *Catalogue of the Choice Library of the Late Edward Cheney, Esq.* (London: Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge, 25 June 1886).

11 Norton recommended that Gardner bid for printed books only: two early editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy* printed in 1487 in Brescia by Bonino de' Bonini (now ISGM 2.c.1.7) and in 1502 in Venice by Aldus Manutius (ISGM 2.c.1.4), and a second Aldine publication in 1499, the celebrated *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (ISGM 2.b.1.1). Carter, *Isabella Stewart Gardner and Fenway Court*, 97–98.

LONDON, 15 Piccadilly, W. *July 2* 1886

Mr Norton _____
to BERNARD QUARITCH.

My terms are, Cash. POST OFFICE ORDERS payable at PICCADILLY CIRCUS, W.

Lost	at	Lot	Limit	Purchased for
<i>Cheney Sale.</i>				
1783		✓ 29 Alfieri ✓	<i>fair value</i>	4
11	10	- 124 Bacon	<i>do</i>	
1761		✓ 141 Barbano ✓	<i>do</i>	2 15
1791		✓ 329 Byron ✓	<i>do</i>	16
43		- 542 Dante	<i>do</i>	
1833		✓ 544 Dante	<i>do</i>	2 13
11		- 661 Ducale	<i>do</i>	
11	5	- 662 <i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	
<i>Manuscript</i>		✓ 663 <i>do</i>	<i>do</i>	29
1562		✓ 920 Stolbeim ✓	<i>do</i>	4 4
1847 1546		✓ 1344 Petrarca	<i>do</i>	1 1
119		- 1441 Polipinto	<i>do</i>	
				55 17
<i>Com 10%</i>				5 11
				61 8

Mrs. S. Gardner *Bernard Quaritch* *with thanks*

FIGURE 4. Bernard Quaritch. Receipt for Isabella Stewart Gardner’s purchases at Sotheby’s sale of the library of Edward Cheney (25 June 1886), including list of desiderata with prices for successful bids, 2 July 1886. Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Archive.

The *ducali* were not illustrated in the Sotheby's catalog, but they can be identified with three extant *commissioni* thanks to their extensive lot descriptions, which detailed the names of the granting doge and recipient, the latter's appointment, date, official ducal signatures, subject of illuminations, coats of arms, and binding decoration. They are the commissions of Doge Andrea Gritti to Bertuccio Contarini as Rector of Retino in Crete, 1531; Doge Girolamo Priuli to Paolo Contarini as Podesta and Capitano of Feltre, 1562; and Doge Giovanni II Cornaro to Giovanni Bollani as Podesta of Chioggia, 1718.¹² The first two books reappeared on the market in 1995 and were sold by Sotheby's (present location unknown), and the third manuscript is now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum.¹³ All three were embellished with illuminated frontispieces depicting allegories of Venetian government and had their original gold-tooled leather or silver repoussé and chased bindings. The Bollani *commissione* issued in 1718 was particularly rare in that it still had its ducal seal attached, which appears to be the reason why Gardner chose to bid for it instead of another eighteenth-century ducal that had lost its *bolla* (see fig. 3).¹⁴ Quaritch managed to secure for £2 13 shillings the eighteenth-century *commissione*, but was outbid for the two Renaissance volumes by Archibald Philip Primrose, fifth earl of Rosebery (1847–1929), who was a noted bibliophile with a particular fondness for Italy and bought heavily at most of the important late nineteenth-century library sales. At the time Rosebery was Britain's Foreign Secretary, and later served as Prime Minister.

It is unclear whether Norton also advised Gardner to bid for the *commissioni* or whether she chose them of her own accord, having already developed

12 Receipt from Bernard Quaritch to Isabella Stewart Gardner, 2 July 1886, ISGM, Archive, Dealers' Files. *Catalogue of the Choice Library of the Late Edward Cheney*, lots 661–63 respectively. The anonymous artist of the Bollani *commissione* also illuminated one issued by the same doge to Bortolomio VIII known as Gaetano as Podesta and Capitano of Treviso, 1718; Venice, Biblioteca del Museo Correr, Cl. III, n. 240. See "Le commissioni ducali nelle collezioni dei Musei Civici Veneziani," *Bollettino dei Musei Civici Veneziani*, 3rd ser., 8 (2013): 49, fig. 20.

13 *The Continental Library of Archibald, 5th Earl of Rosebery and Midlothian, K.G., K. T.* (London: Sotheby's, 25 May 1995), 13–16, ill.

14 *Catalogue of the Choice Library of the Late Edward Cheney, Esq.*, lot. 664, Commission of Doge Loredan to Giovanni Bollani as Podestà at Verona, 1756.

an interest in Venetian art and history two years earlier, in 1884, on her first sojourn to the lagoon city in adulthood.¹⁵ Either way, Norton was bound to have influenced Gardner. At Shady Hill, which served informally but significantly as a teaching museum before the opening of the Fogg Art Museum in 1896, he kept a collection of *commissioni* that Gardner would likely have seen there. Furthermore, we know from notes taken by one of Norton's students that just months before the Cheney sale, the professor delivered two lectures in Fine Arts 5, his course on Venice, dedicated to the "Mythical origin of Venice and the Legend of St. Mark" and "History and Government."¹⁶ For the former, he narrated the story of the theft of St. Mark's relics from Alexandria by Venetian merchants, their translation to Venice, and construction of St. Mark's basilica to house the city's new patron saint. In the latter lecture, he described the role of the doge and nobility in the governance of the state and espoused "the relations of the political institutions and social order of Venice to her arts."¹⁷ Gardner audited Norton's course, and so she would have been well equipped to appreciate the artistic and historical value of Cheney's *commissioni* when they came on the market in London a few months later.

The Norton and Ruskin Collections of Venetian Manuscripts

Charles Eliot Norton formed his own collection of Venetian manuscripts between the 1870s and 1900. He was influenced by a circle of British expatriates residing in Venice, to whom he was introduced by his close friend the English art and social critic John Ruskin (1819–1900). These men shared an immense reverence for the Serenissima, for which the Boston Brahmin

15 "The Art of Venice," in *Eye of the Beholder: Masterpieces from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum*, ed. Alan Chong, Richard Lingner, and Carl Zahn (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, in association with Beacon, 2003), 94–112.

16 William Thayer, *Notes on Norton's Italian Art*, 1885–1886, Lecture II, Thursday, 18 February 1886 and Lecture VIII, Tuesday, 9 May 1886 (respectively), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Archives, HUC 8885.328.

17 Thayer, *Notes on Norton's Italian Art*, Lecture II and Lecture VIII.

Norton had a natural affinity. For in the nineteenth century the upper echelons of Boston society were fascinated with and admired the Venetian combination of republican government, patrician families, and maritime heritage that they believed so closely resembled their own.¹⁸ Norton expressed this sentiment to Ruskin in a letter of 1871:¹⁹

For largeness of design within the limits of the State, for method of policy, for gravity of purpose, for splendor in life, for the union of beauty with strength, elegance with force, luxury with self-control, Venice and the Venetians of old were never matched in history.²⁰

Two of Ruskin's friends, whom Norton met in Venice in 1871, aided him in acquiring Venetian manuscripts there. The first man was the English historian and antiquary Rawdon Lubbock Brown (1806–1883), who claimed to have moved to Venice in 1833 on a whimsical mission to find the grave of Thomas Mowbray, the "banish'd Norfolk" of Shakespeare's history play *Richard II*. Brown spent the rest of his life in Venice, acquiring an unrivalled knowledge of its history and antiquities by studying and publishing on the city's archives. His publication in 1854 of the dispatches of a Venetian ambassador in London at the beginning of the reign of Henry VIII shed such new light on the relation of the Venetian archives to English history

18 Peter Ferguson, "Save Venice: The First Forty Years," in *Serenissima on the Charles* (Boston: Save Venice Boston, 2009), 1–7 at 3.

19 For their friendship and Ruskin's description of the men to his father, in a letter of 11 October [1851], as "both as good-natured as can be—but of a different Species from me—men of the world—caring very little about anything but Men. Cheney is a kind of Beckford—I am not so sure but that there is not some slight affectation of resemblance only he lets people into his house, which I believe Beckford never would," see John Lewis Bradley, *Ruskin's Letters from Venice 1851–1852* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), 35, letter no. 34.

20 Citing a letter from Charles Eliot Norton to John Ruskin, July 1871, from John Lewis Bradley and Ian Ousby, eds., *The Correspondence of John Ruskin and Charles Eliot Norton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), no. 166. Kathryn McClintock, "The Classroom and the Courtyard: Medievalism in American Highbrow Culture," in *Medieval Art in America: Patterns of Collecting 1800–1940*, ed. Elizabeth Bradford Smith, Kathryn McClintock, R. Aaron Rottner, and Sarah Andrews (University Park: Palmer Museum of Art, Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 42.

that he was commissioned by the British government to compile the *Calendar of state papers and manuscripts relating to English affairs existing in the archives and collections of Venice, and in other libraries of northern Italy* (5 vols; 1864–1881).²¹ Brown acted as host and guide to countless eminent British and American visitors, collectors, and scholars, most notably Ruskin, whom he assisted in research for *The Stones of Venice*. Norton spent hours at Brown's home on the Grand Canal, asking him abstruse questions about Venice and examining the many manuscripts, books, and documents that littered tables in his study, and the paintings and engravings of Venetian subjects adorning the walls.²² Ruskin's wife, Effie, summed these items up perfectly as "curiosities of great value which could only be got by a long residence in Venice" and singled out his "fine collection of manuscripts of the Doges."²³ Brown acquired these *commissioni* in the 1830s from the collection of the patrician Domenico Tiepolo, which was being sold off by his heirs. It comprised a significant number of *commissioni* that had been granted to members of the Contarini della Porta di Ferro ("of the iron door"), the Castello branch of the noble family that became extinct in 1799, after which their possessions passed to the Tiepolo.²⁴ Conscious of the historical importance of his collection of Venetian manuscripts, Brown chose to safeguard the

21 For Brown, see Ralph A. Griffiths and John E. Law, eds., *Rawdon Brown and the Anglo-Venetian Relationship* (Shroud: Nonsuch, 2005).

22 Van Akin Burd, ed., *Christmas Story: John Ruskin's Venetian Letters of 1876–1877* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1990), 167; and James Turner, *The Liberal Education of Charles Eliot Norton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 244.

23 Griffiths and Law, *Rawdon Brown and the Anglo-Venetian Relationship*, 128–29.

24 Letter from Rawdon Brown to Charles Eliot Norton, Venice, 24 November 1878, Cambridge, MA, Houghton Library, bMS Am 1088, 692—not from the Contarini archive, as stated in Griffiths and Law, *Rawdon Brown and the Anglo-Venetian Relationship*, 77. Brown bequeathed them to the Public Records Office, now Commission of Doge Cristoforo Moro to Bertuccio Contarini as Podestà of Brescia, 1471, National Archive at Kew, PRO 30/25/104/1; and Commission of Doge Giovanni Mocenigo to Bartolomeo Minio as Captain of the Flinders Gallies, 1485, PRO 30/25/104/2. See Anna Paola Massarotto, "Illuminated Official Portraiture in Cinquecento Venice: The Collection of Dogal Commissions in the Public Records Office" (Master's diss., Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 1998), <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/catalogue/displaycataloguedetails.asp?CATLN=3&CAT=10757&j=1>.

manuscripts by donating it to the British Public Records Office (now the National Archive) by bequest to the nation.

Norton probably acquired the *commissione* issued by Doge Giovanni Bembo to Francesco Contarini as Procurator *de citra* of 1615, which has a portrait of the high-ranking senator who became the fifth of eight Contarini doges in 1623, from the Tiepolo collection via Brown, who sold as well as bought "historical curiosities" (fig. 5).²⁵ Their correspondence dating from the winter of 1878–1879 shows that Brown notified Norton of an opportunity to acquire three or four illuminated leaves from Renaissance *commissioni* for a hundred francs each from the dealer Vincenzo Favenza at Venice; some unspecified miniatures from Michelangelo Guggenheim (1837–1913), a picture dealer and maker of Renaissance-style furniture also in Venice; and twenty-seven *commissioni* at 50 francs each from the Giustinian family at Padua, who had inherited the collection from the extinct Venetian noble family the Barbarigo della Terrazza.²⁶ Unfortunately, these collections were snapped up and dispersed by Ferdinando Ongania (1842–1911), a bookseller and publisher on Venetian art and history, whose St. Mark's Square shop was favored by Anglophone tourists and expatriates.²⁷

Norton was most definitely also inspired to collect *commissioni* by Edward Cheney's *Remarks on the Illuminated Official Manuscripts of the Venetian Republic*, the first English language treatise on Venetian manuscripts, which was published as an article in 1868 and reissued separately as an offprint by Cheney in 1871.²⁸ Cheney, from whose library sale Gardner acquired her

25 ISGM 2.c.1.2.

26 Letter from Rawdon Brown to Charles Eliot Norton, Venice, 24 November 1878, Houghton bMS Am 1088, 692; and letter from Rawdon Brown to Charles Eliot Norton, Venice, 16 January 1879, Houghton bMS Am 1088, 693. For the dispersal of the Barbarigo's art collection, see Ines Lamprecht, *Der Palazzo Barbarigo della Terrazza zu Venedig* (Studi / Centro Tedesco di Studi Veneziani, Neue Folge, 11; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014).

27 Letter from Rawdon Brown to Charles Eliot Norton, Venice, 26 October 1880, Houghton bMS Am 1088, 694. For Ongania, see Mariachiara Mazzariol, ed., *Ferdinando Ongania editore a San Marco* (Venice: Marsilio, 2008), 39–44.

28 Edward Cheney, "Remarks on the Illuminated Official Manuscripts of the Venetian Republic," *Miscellanies of the Philobiblon Society* 11 (1867–1868): 1–96.



FIGURE 5. Giovanni Bembo presented by St. Francis of Assisi to the Virgin and Child, from a *commissione* issued by Doge Giovanni Bembo to Francesco Contarini as Procurator de citra (1615). Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2.c.1.2.

first *commissione* in 1886, was a notable member of Anglo-Italian society who lived in Naples and Rome before moving in the 1840s to Venice, where he resided at Palazzo Soranzo-Piovene on the Grand Canal. During his time in Italy, as well as forming a fine library, Cheney made a collection of pictures, chiefly of the Venetian school, with a pioneering concentration on Tiepolo drawings and oil sketches. Cheney was also an original member of the Philobiblon Society, founded in 1853, for whose journal he wrote a number of scholarly articles on original documents connected with Venetian painters of the sixteenth century, and the aforementioned *Remarks on the Illuminated Official Manuscripts of the Venetian Republic*, which described the format, decoration, and function of different types of state-sanctioned documents.²⁹ Rawdon Brown, a mutual friend of Norton and Cheney, introduced them to one another in 1871, and Cheney subsequently sent Norton his treatise on Venetian manuscripts as well as recommendations for a copier and restorer of *commissioni* illuminations (fig. 6).³⁰

Cheney's *Remarks*, which he prepared with Brown's assistance by examining numerous manuscripts in Venetian and foreign collections, was not only highly informative for an Anglophone readership in the lagoon city and beyond, but also an incitement for them to collect Venetian manuscripts, for in the introduction to the work, Cheney commented:

As the custom of issuing statutes and commissions from the Ducal chancery in the same form, worded nearly in the same terms, illuminated in the same manner, differing only in style, continued from an early date to the fall of the Republic, a most curious collection might be made, illustrating the state of the art itself during that

29 Charles Sebag-Montefiore, "Cheney, Edward (1803–1884)," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/37277>, accessed 1 June 2011. See also Tim Knox, "Edward Cheney of Badger Hall: A Forgotten Collector of Italian Sculpture," *The Sculpture Journal* 16 (2007): 5–20.

30 Letter from Rawdon Brown to Charles Eliot Norton, [Venice], 6 May [1871], Houghton bMS Am 1088, 696; letter from Edward Cheney to Charles Eliot Norton, Casa Della Vida, [Venice], 7 May 1871, Houghton bMS Am 1088.

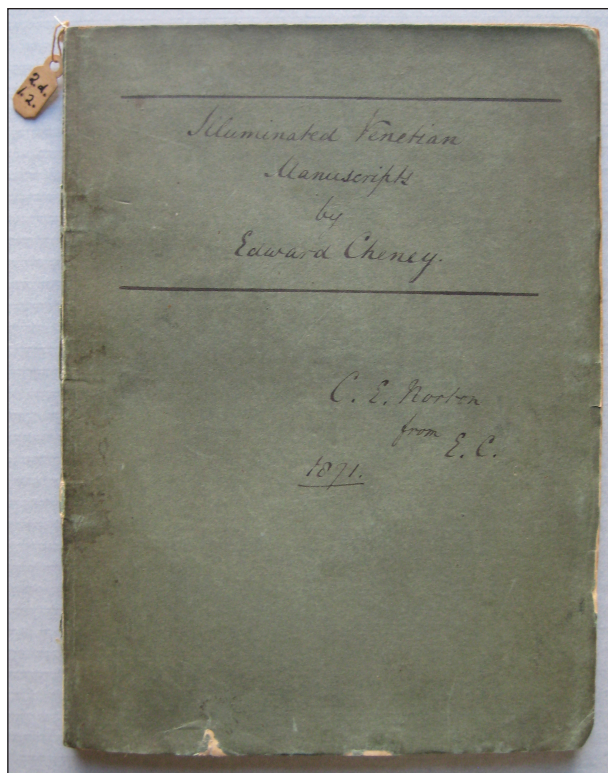


FIGURE 6. Edward Cheney, "Remarks on the Illuminated Official Manuscripts of the Venetian Republic," 1871. Front cover inscribed by Charles Eliot Norton. Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2.d.1.2.

period. *I am not aware that any collection has been made with this object; certainly it has not been attempted in Venice.*³¹

Cheney's assertion that there was no collection focused on the history of Venetian illumination, not even in Venice itself, was disingenuous, for the expat circle to which Norton was introduced by Ruskin had by no means invented the collecting and study of Venetian illuminated documents. Cheney and Brown consulted at the Museo Correr the manuscript collections of the Venetians Teodoro Correr (1750–1830) and Emmanuele Anto-

31 Cheney, "Remarks on the Illuminated Official Manuscripts," 9. Emphasis added.

nio Cicogna (1789–1868), which were accessible and exhibited to the public starting in 1794 and 1865 respectively, as well as the holdings of the Marciana Library.³² Cheney's *Remarks* also drew on the writings of Cicogna and of the archivist Cesare Foucard (1825–1892), who in 1857 had published the pioneering, illustrated *Della pittura sui manoscritti di Venezia* under the auspices of the Accademia di Belle Arti di Venezia.³³ In their scholarship, collecting, and philanthropy in respect to Venetian documents, Correr, Cicogna, and Foucard were nostalgic patriots, politically motivated to safeguard the memory of the fallen but once mighty Serenissima from the hegemony of their Austrian rulers.³⁴

Charles Eliot Norton acquired some of his last Venetian manuscripts from John Ruskin's own collection, which had been formed from the early 1850s and comprised at least ninety illuminated manuscripts, predominantly Gothic-era religious texts.³⁵ The Venetian manuscripts in Ruskin's collection comprised sixteenth- to eighteenth-century lay confraternity statutes and texts on Venetian history and heraldry, and so were conspicuous for their comparatively late date and secular content. These were presumably of less interest to Ruskin for their art than for their historical value for his studies on Venice. Norton's acquisition in 1900 of two Venetian manuscripts from Ruskin's collection must have been bittersweet, as he purchased them from the heirs of his great friend who had died in January of that year. The books were the *Prattica delle corti del Palazzo di Venetia*, an undecorated, mid-seventeenth-century account of the offices of government, and an illuminated *mariegola*, or statute book of the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament, who were guardians of the sacramental altar in the church of

32 Piero Lucchi, "Le commissioni ducali del Correr tra biblioteca e museo," in "Le commissioni ducali nelle collezioni dei Musei Civici Veneziani," *Bollettino dei Musei Civici Veneziani*, 3rd ser., 8 (2013): 7–23 at 19.

33 In 1851, Cicogna published *Documenti storici inediti pertinenti alla Città del Portogruaro* (Portogruaro: B. Castion, 1851), a monograph on the commissione of Doge Leonardo Loredan to Jacopo Marin as Podestà of Portogruaro, 1519. Lucchi, "Le commissioni ducali del Correr tra biblioteca e museo," 13–15 and 18.

34 Lucchi, "Le commissioni ducali del Correr tra biblioteca e museo," 15, 19.

35 James S. Dearden, "John Ruskin, the Collector with a Catalogue of the Illuminated and Other Manuscripts Formerly in His Collection," *The Library*, 5th ser., 21 (1966): 124–54.



FIGURE 7. Confraternity members attending to the host monstrance and a vision of the Eucharistic pietà, from the *Mariegola della Scuola del Santissimo Sacramento di San Geminiano* (*Statute Book of the Confraternity of the Holy Sacrament of the Church of St. Geminiano*), Venice, 1504–1799. Workshop of Benedetto Bordon (d. 1530). Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2.b.2.4.

San Geminiano (fig. 7). One of Venice's most ancient and beautiful parish churches, San Geminiano graced St. Mark's Square with its elegant Sansovino-designed façade from the Renaissance until 1807, when it was demolished by order of Napoleon to make way for the construction of a monumental staircase and ballroom for his royal palace.³⁶ The *mariegola* contains the confraternity's statutes, notices of its charitable works, bequests, and other details of its history in both manuscript and print dating from 1504–1799, and was decorated in 1504 by the workshop of the aforementioned Benedetto Bordon, one of the most sought-after Venetian illuminators of the early sixteenth century. Its double-frontispiece is adorned with a vision of the Eucharistic pietà (known as *Cristo in cain* in Venetian dialect),

36 Alvise Zorzi, *Venezia scomparsa* (Milan: Electa, 1984), 52, 69–72, 80–82, 108.

and confraternal members attending to the host monstrance held by a priest.³⁷ The bound volume itself was used as a para-liturgical object, and its illuminations were used as devotional images.³⁸ The *mariegola* probably attracted Ruskin for the social and moral conditions under which it was created, which he believed to be intrinsic to the aesthetic quality of art.³⁹

Gardner's Purchase of the Norton Collection of Venetian Manuscripts

In 1903, Charles Eliot Norton invited Isabella Stewart Gardner to his home to see his collection of Venetian manuscripts and learn about "their respective value & rarity," as he had decided to sell the book treasures. Recognizing "their value as a collection to be more than that which they would have separately" for their mutual illustration of one another "both historically and artistically," he offered it *en bloc* for \$2,500 to Gardner, as he believed that there was not "another purchaser in the United States . . . who would care enough for them to give that sum for them."⁴⁰ Norton's flattering assertion that there was no other American collector who would appreciate the value of his collection was not strictly true, for a number of Gilded Age magnates were buying both intact *commissioni* and their detached miniatures in the same period. From the 1890s to the 1920s, they were collected by the Italophile William T. Scheide (1847–1907) of Pennsylvania; two Baltimore men, railroad magnate Henry Walters and Robert Garrett (1875–1961), Olympic champion in discus and shot putter-turned-banker; the New York banker and art collector John Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913);

37 Catherine Puglisi and William Barcham, eds., *Passion in Venice: Crivelli to Tintoretto and Veronese* (New York: Museum of Biblical Art, 2011), 108–13, cat. no. 40.

38 Lyle Humphrey, "The Illumination of Confraternity and Guild Statutes in Venice, ca. 1260–1500: *Mariegola* Production, Iconography, and Use" (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York, 2007), 6–7.

39 For Ruskin's study in 1877 of copies of the *mariegola* of the Scuola di Santa Maria di Valverde, see Burd, *Christmas Story*, 236–38.

40 Letter from Charles Eliot Norton to Isabella Stewart Gardner, Shady Hill, 28 May 1903, ISGM, Archive.

the Philadelphian lawyer John Frederick Lewis (1860–1932); and the California-based railroad mogul Henry E. Huntington (1850–1927).⁴¹ Thanks to them, today numerous *commissioni* (mainly single leaves) are represented in museums and libraries on both coasts of the United States.⁴² None of these collectors, however, had a special interest in Venice, and probably did not value as highly as Norton and Gardner did the interrelation of the text, illumination, and binding as a glorification of the fallen Serenissima. Instead, these American collectors fell roughly into two camps of interest. For the wealthiest, such as Morgan and Huntington, *commissioni* were just a fraction of the hoards of book treasures they imported from Europe in order to build impressive Old World-style libraries in the United States. For others, such as Scheide, Walters, Garrett and Lewis, Venetian manuscripts were admired specimens in encyclopedic collections charting the development of scripts and decoration for a history of the book. Most likely, for those among them such as Walters and Morgan who also collected Renaissance art, the *commissioni*'s full-page miniatures would have also functioned as a gallery of Venetian portraiture that supplemented their monumental paintings, especially those illuminated by artists who were followers of the great Venetian Renaissance painters such as Bellini, Titian, Veronese, and Tintoretto.⁴³ A prime example of a *commissione* acquired for its likeness to an independent painting, in this case a diptych, is the superb double illumination of female personifications of Prudence and Faith presenting the officer-elect Marin Venier to the Virgin and Child, which was unusually signed and dated (1551) by its miniaturist Gaspare da Verona (fl. 1524–1551) (fig. 8).⁴⁴ It was purchased in 1908 for £80 for John Pierpont Morgan in Florence by the English art critic Roger Fry (1866–1934), who described it as a “really elaborate painting in the style of Veronese and . . .

41 See De Ricci and Wilson, *Census of Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts*.

42 Noteworthy are the collections at Princeton University Library, the Walters Art Museum, Morgan Museum and Library, Free Library of Philadelphia, Huntington Library, and University of Pennsylvania Libraries. See the *Digital Scriptorium*: bancroft.berkeley.edu/digital-scriptorium.

43 Szépe, “Painters and Patrons in Venetian Documents,” 27, 29.

44 Susy Marcon, “Gaspare da Verona,” in *Dizionario biografico dei miniatori italiani, secoli IX–XVI*, ed. Milvia Bollati (Milan: Sylvestre Bonnard, 2004), 258.

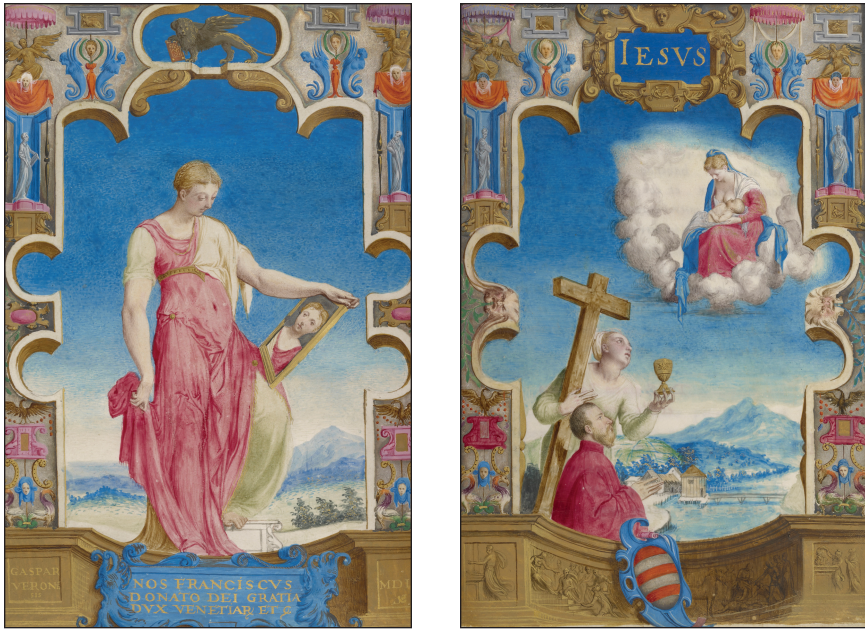


FIGURE 8. Marin Venier presented by personifications of Prudence (left) and Faith (right) to the Virgin and Child, from the *Commissione* issued by Doge Francesco Donato to Venier as Podestà and Captain of Sacile, 1551. Gaspare da Verona (active 1524–1551). New York, Morgan Library and Museum, MS M.353.

sumptuous to the last degree.”⁴⁵ Fry’s assignment of the illumination to the school of Veronese is notable since few scholars or collectors attributed their miniatures to the great masters until Seymour De Ricci did for his *Census*

45 New York, Morgan Library and Museum, MS M.353, with inserted letter from Roger Fry to John Pierpont Morgan, Chantry Dene, Guilford, 16 December 16 [19]08:

Chantry Dene, Guilford, Dec. 16. [19]08. Dear Mr. Morgan, When I was in Florence I came across two books which I think desirable for your collection. They are commissions issued by the senate to the Doges of Venice with elaborate instructions in administration. / The first is issued to Giovanni Antonio Venier 1530. The second to Marino Venier 1550. One has one full page illumination, the other two. These full pages are really elaborate paintings in the style of Veronese and are sumptuous to the last degree. The price of the books is £80 each. If you care for them, I am sure that they w/could please you and that the price is not extravagant, will you let me know or better still communicate direct with the owner Giovanni Dotti 21 Via del Proconsolo Florence. Yours very truly Roger Fry.

of *Medieval and Renaissance Manuscripts in the United States and Canada* in the 1930s. The best-known exception is in England, where a nineteenth-century dealer or owner crudely scratched into the paint at the lower edge of a detached *commissione* leaf “T.o Ve. Dep. 1528” (or “Tiziano Vecellio painted 1528”), attributing the miniature to Titian (now Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum) (fig. 9).⁴⁶

Norton's regret at parting with the Venetian manuscripts was tempered by his relief that they would be in Gardner's safekeeping, as he was concerned that in other hands the books would be broken up for their collectible illuminations and bindings. Indeed, on completion of the transaction in July 1903, he wrote to her “I am glad to think of the Mss as in your possession, and safe from destruction by fire,” perhaps in reference to William Blades' *The Enemies of Books* (1880), the first chapter of which was devoted to famous libraries and books that had succumbed to “chance conflagrations, fanatic incendiarism, judicial bonfires, and even household stoves” and estimated that “not one thousandth part of the books that have been are still extant.”⁴⁷ Norton sent with the manuscripts his annotated copy of Edward Cheney's *Remarks*, given to him by the author in 1871, to help Gardner with the cataloging of the collection.⁴⁸ The seminal book discussed two manuscripts now in her possession, the Bollani *commissione* acquired in 1886, which Cheney praised for its luxurious silver and silk binding,⁴⁹ and the *mariegola* purchased from Norton in 1903, which earned a mention not only for its illumination but also for its documentation of the fall of the

46 Nigel Morgan, Stella Panayotova, and Suzanne Reynolds, eds., *Illuminated Manuscripts in Cambridge: A Catalogue of Western Book Illumination in the Fitzwilliam Museum and the Cambridge Colleges*, part 2, vol. 1, *Italy & Iberian Peninsula* (London: Harvey Miller, 2011), 159, no. 84.

47 Letter from Charles Eliot Norton to Isabella Stewart Gardner, Ashfield, 3 July 1903, ISGM, Archive.

48 Norton's copy of Cheney's monograph is now in the ISGM (2.d.1.2).

49 Cheney, “Remarks on the Illuminated Official Manuscripts,” 83. Inserted was a letter from Edward Cheney to Charles Eliot Norton, Casa Della Vida, 22 May 1871. The Bollani manuscript is now ISGM 2.a.3.1.



FIGURE 9. Mark the Evangelist with St. Peter observed by St. Sebastian, and the Tagliapietra arms, from the *Commissione* of Doge Andrea Gritti to Pietro Tagliapietra as Podestà of Vicenza, 1535. T.o. Ve. Master (active 1520s–1560s. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Marlay Cutting It. 43. © The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Republic, suppression of the confraternity of the Holy Sacrament, and demolition of the church of San Geminiano (figs. 3 and 8).⁵⁰

Gardner's purchase of the Norton manuscripts in 1903 not only enabled her to fill the gap in her rare books collection for sixteenth-century Venetian illuminations and gold-tooled leather bindings, which she had missed out on securing at the Cheney sale in 1886, but also provided her with a corpus of Venetian painting spanning three centuries and multiple genres including portraiture, landscape, and religious and allegorical works, executed for individual patrons and communal use, which was the perfect addition to her newly-opened Venetian-style palace. For at Fenway Court, as the museum was known during her lifetime, there were two galleries, called the Titian and Veronese rooms, dedicated to the golden ages of Venetian painting, represented by works attributed to the celebrated Renaissance masters Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese, and eighteenth-century artists Tiepolo, Guardi, and Longhi (fig. 1).⁵¹ Elsewhere in the building, Venetian Gothic painting and contemporary art produced in the lagoon city by Gardner's cosmopolitan circle provided bookends to her display of the history of Venetian painting.⁵² It was the inauguration of Gardner's temple to Venetian art on New Year's Day of 1903, which Norton praised in a letter to her as a "consummate . . . achievement . . . in which a poetic conception has found poetic expression,"⁵³ as well as Gardner's plans to bequeath the museum "for the education and enjoyment of the public forever" that prompted the professor to pass on his precious trove of Venetian manuscripts to her in that moment. A year before the museum's opening, Norton presented Gardner with an eighteenth-century portrait of a Venetian governor thought to be Andrea Contarini and painted by Pietro Longhi to hang between the windows in

50 Cheney, "Remarks on the Illuminated Official Manuscripts," 24.

51 Philip Hendy, *European and American Paintings in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum* (Boston: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 1974).

52 Alan Chong, "Artistic Life in Venice," in McCauley et al., *Gondola Days*, 94–112.

53 Letter of Charles Eliot Norton to Isabella Stewart Gardner, Shady Hill, 2 January 1903, ISGM, Archive.

the Veronese Room. The professor's gift suggests that, had his family not needed the money, he would have also donated the Venetian manuscripts to Gardner's collection.⁵⁴

In September of the museum's inaugural year, Norton offered Gardner an opportunity to expand the collection of Venetian manuscripts manifold. He had been informed by a certain Robin Grey, an Englishman based in New York, that Count Manin, a direct descendant of Ludovico Manin, the last doge of Venice (1789–1797), wished to find an American buyer for his collection of 1,500 manuscripts related to the history of Venice, for which the asking price was \$25,000.⁵⁵ Norton replied to Grey that "he was sorry that such a collection should leave Venice; that [he] should not want it to be here [in America] unless secured by someone who would see to its being permanently kept together" and that he "knew of only one amateur of wealth, sufficient knowledge, and sufficiently cultivated taste to appreciate it at its worth."⁵⁶ Yet Gardner declined the offer, most likely because of the financial constraints she experienced after the construction of her grand museum. She did not acquire any more Venetian manuscripts, remaining content with her small but comprehensive collection, associated with a circle of British and American men who had made the greatest Anglophone contribution to the knowledge and safeguarding of Venetian culture in her day: John Ruskin, the most influential art theorist of the nineteenth century

54 A year before the museum's opening, Norton had already donated for the Veronese Room an eighteenth-century, three-quarter length oil painting of a Venetian governor, then thought to be Andrea Contarini painted by Pietro Longhi, but recently identified as the portrait of Pietro Pisani di Francesco of Santo Stefano, Procurator of St. Mark, 1701, by Niccolò Cassana (1659–1713), 130 x 100 cm, ISGM, P25n2. Carter, *Isabella Stewart Gardner and Fenway Court*, 194; Hendy, *European and American Paintings*, 201–2, ill.; and Paolo de Lorenzi, *La Galleria di Minerva: Il ritratto di rappresentanza nella Venezia del Settecento* (Venice: Venezia Barocca, 2009), 150, 305, 516, fig. 77.

55 Copy of a letter from Robin Grey to Charles Eliot Norton, Douglas House, Douglaston, Long Island, New York, 31 August 1903, ISGM, Archive; Letters of Charles Eliot Norton to Isabella Stewart Gardner, Ashfield, 2 September 1903, and Shady Hill, 30 October 1903, ISGM, Archive.

56 Letter of Charles Eliot Norton to Isabella Stewart Gardner, Ashfield, 2 September 1903, ISGM, Archive.

and author of a book that inspired Gardner to literally bring back the city's stones in the form of columns, windows, and sculpture to create a Venetian palace on Boston's Fens;⁵⁷ Edward Cheney, author of the first English-language description of Venetian illuminated official documents; and her old friend, the Italianist Charles Eliot Norton, the "Father of Art History in America."⁵⁸ Self-assured of her position in the history of the preservation of Venetian cultural patrimony, Isabella Stewart Gardner claimed her rightful place amongst this distinguished company. Indeed, on the front fly-leaves of her newly-acquired manuscripts, which had been inscribed by her august predecessors, she signed, dated, and added the words "mine now" (fig. 10). Aside from being the only woman amongst them, Gardner was also the sole museum founder in that group. Her inscription, therefore, should be interpreted not as sign of covetousness, but rather as a mark of pride that keeping an important collection of Venetian manuscripts "safe from destruction by fire" and intact for posterity would be part of her legacy.

57 Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., with Susan C. Ricci, "Charles Eliot Norton: Ruskin's Friend, Harvard's Sage," in *The Last Ruskinians: Charles Eliot Norton, Charles Herbert Moore, and Their Circle*, ed. Theodore E. Stebbins and Virginia Anderson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2007), 25.

58 Sybil Gordon Kantor, "Beginnings of Art History at Harvard and the 'Fogg Method,'" in *The Early Years of Art History in the United States: Notes and Essays on Departments, Teaching, and Scholars*, ed. Craig Hugh Smyth and Peter M. Lukehart (Princeton: Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University, 1993), 161.

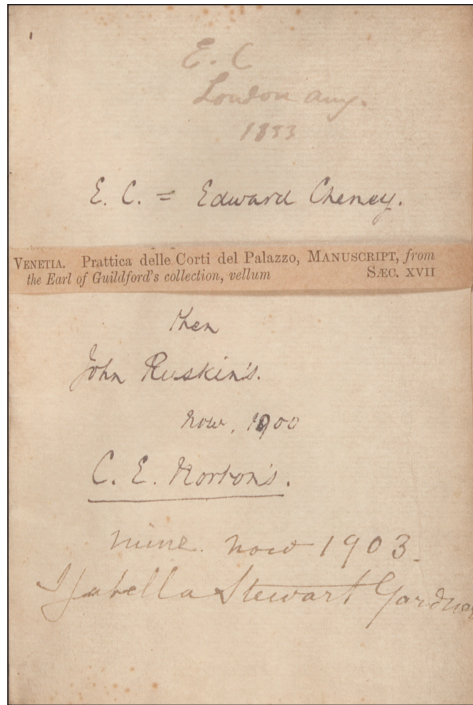


FIGURE 10. Prattica delle corti del Palazzo di Venezia. Recto of front flyleaf with the ownership inscriptions of Edward Cheney, John Ruskin, Charles Eliot Norton, and Isabella Stewart Gardner. Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2.c.2.7.